

# The Arkansas Civil War Heritage Trail

## A Grassroots Battlefield Preservation Initiative

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**W**hen then-Secretary of the Interior Manuel Lujan announced the formation of the American Battlefield Protection Program (ABPP) in 1990, the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program (AHPP) was an enthusiastic partner, seeing the initiative as a great vehicle for researching some of the more than 770 Civil War actions that took place in the State.

The AHPP joined in the initial ABPP survey, mapping and evaluating Civil War battle sites included on a National Park Service list of Arkansas battles. Ultimately, only one site, Prairie Grove in Washington County, site of a bloody December 7, 1862, battle, was deemed a priority site for preservation. The other mapped battlefields were relegated to lower positions on the priority list, and no allowance was made for the hundreds of other skirmishes, actions, and engagements that took place throughout the State.

Then-Director Cathy Slater and staff members wanted to use the momentum of the ABPP activities to continue efforts to identify, protect, interpret, and promote the State's Civil War-related historic resources. Aware of the success of the Main Street Arkansas program, the AHPP sought to develop a network of partnerships that would take the initiative on local efforts for local sites. To that end (and jump-started by an ABPP planning grant), the AHPP established the Arkansas Civil War Heritage Trail (ACWHT), a statewide series of regional volunteer organizations that would focus on Civil War sites in their areas.

AHPP staff members first divided the State into five

regions, setting admittedly arbitrary boundaries that have been altered somewhat over the years as the ACWHT groups developed their own projects and priorities. Then, after identifying organizations and individuals who would likely be interested in participating in the program, organizational meetings were held over a 3-year period.

In these meetings, the AHPP explained the formation of the ABPP, the concept of the ACWHT, and the need to identify Civil War sites that were forgotten or lost for good to development. Volunteers were then asked to serve as officers in the groups, a request that usually led to a long, uncomfortable silence in the meeting room, but always resulted in someone agreeing to take the leadership role for their region.

In 1994, the first ACWHT group was formed in northwest Arkansas. Over the course of the next 3 years, four other ACWHT groups were formed in northeast, southeast, southwest, and central Arkansas. The northwest group later split in two to better focus on different sites within the region.

*Efforts are being made to purchase the core area of the Reed's Bridge Battlefield in Jacksonville, AR. The wayside exhibit in the foreground was created by the Central Arkansas Civil War Heritage Trail using partnership funds from the ABPP. Photo courtesy AHPP.*



AHPP oversight of the Trail groups is minimal, with the State agency producing a quarterly newsletter (available online at <<http://www.arkansaspreservation.org/history/publications.asp>>) and providing technical assistance to the local trails. The AHPP also seeks grant funding for local ACWHT projects. From the beginning, though, the strength of the ACWHT has been its grassroots advocacy for local sites.

Membership in the ACWHT groups has attracted an interesting mix of people. While some groups include employees of the National Park Service, Arkansas State Parks, or other public agencies, the majority are private citizens motivated by an interest in Civil War history. And while a large percentage are also members of Confederate descendant organizations such as the Sons of Confederate Veterans and the United Daughters of the Confederacy, the focus of the ACWHT groups has remained on the sites instead of becoming sidetracked by Southern heritage-related issues.

Perhaps predictably, a lot of the initial focus of the ACWHT groups has been heritage tourism. Installation of wayside interpretation (much of which was aided by ABPP funding), development of brochures, and inclusion in the Civil War Preservation Trust's National Civil War Discovery Trail have been priorities as the local grassroots organizations sought to show that battlefield preservation can serve as an economic development tool. As time has gone by, however, efforts have moved toward what was the AHPP's top priority from the start: identification and preservation of battlefield land.

Over the past 8 years, the ACWHT groups have amassed a noteworthy series of accomplishments:

- The Central ACWHT group created a driving tour of the 1863 Little Rock Campaign by placing wayside exhibits at several sites related to the campaign. In addition to the distribution of thousands of driving tour brochures, the project helped initiate creation of the Reed's Bridge Battlefield Preservation Society in Jacksonville, which is actively acquiring key pieces of that August 27, 1863, battlefield.
- The Southeast ACWHT group worked in partnership with local newspapers to devise

ways to create inexpensive wayside exhibits at Civil War sites in the region, paving the way for several properties to be included in national and state heritage tourism efforts.

- The Northeast ACWHT group created a series of brochures focusing on Civil War actions and personalities in the region, creating a "paper trail" that will serve as the basis for future efforts to place wayside exhibits in the area.
- The Southwest ACWHT group initiated efforts and is working with the Civil War Preservation Trust to find ways to protect additional acreage at the April 30, 1864, Jenkins' Ferry Battlefield, a National Historic Landmark associated with the Camden Expedition.
- The Northwest ACWHT group created an Arkansas in the Civil War curriculum for Arkansas school children, hosted a Civil War heritage tourism symposium, and developed regional tourism brochures.
- The West Central ACWHT group (formed from the lower counties of the Northwest ACWHT) is working with a city commission to protect and develop the Massard Prairie battlefield in Fort Smith and was instrumental in having that battlefield and a series of rifle pits listed on the Arkansas Register of Historic Places.

The ACWHT has proven to be effective while reflecting the widely varied motivations, personalities, and priorities of the volunteers who make up its core and its spirit. Their efforts will continue to increase public awareness of Arkansas' role in the Civil War and the protection of the tangible reminders of that conflict.

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